

Virtual USA FAQ

What is Virtual USA?

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The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has launched Virtual USA (vUSA), a voluntary, practitioner-driven, and federally sponsored initiative focused on cross-jurisdictional information sharing and collaboration among the homeland security and emergency management communities. Technical solutions and operational guidelines are being developed as a part of vUSA that facilitate the sharing of incident response information through existing systems and geospatial platforms in partnership with local, tribal, state and Federal officials, as well as the vendor community. vUSA will allow homeland security and emergency management stakeholders to quickly access critical information from relevant and authoritative sources, and to customize the display of this information through a collaborative, technical, and governance-development approach. By providing improved situational awareness, vUSA will enable the homeland security and emergency management communities to save lives, protect property, and realize operational efficiencies.

Is it a technology?

vUSA is not a specific information system, technology or software. Partnered with the private sector, vUSA is a collaborative effort that extends across all levels of government. The goal of vUSA is to develop and implement technologies, strategies, methodologies, and processes that enable information sharing. The initiative links existing systems and technologies to improve information acquisition, analysis, management, sharing, and protection across a distributed network. vUSA enables users to continue using their existing systems and to improve their business processes, while also enabling them to access and aggregate information they need from other sources, as authorized. This allows users to view and apply information from a variety of sources in a way that supports their specific needs and missions. vUSA helps states significantly improve the coordination and sharing of information, and also assists the states in integrating technology platforms and providing technical assistance.

What are vUSA's core principles?

The core principles are that vUSA:

- Is not a DHS mandate, but is practitioner-driven; vUSA draws on practitioner input, with guidance and support from DHS
- Leverages existing data collected and maintained by local, state, and Federal agencies, and does not require the acquisition and warehousing of data
- Ensures that data ownership and control remains with the data owner
- Ensures that vUSA partners only share what they want to, when they want to, and with whom they want to share it
- Enables users to share information, regardless of the technology or system they currently use or plan to use in the future
- Integrates existing processes
- Builds on existing open-source technologies while continuing to explore new and emerging open-source technologies

Who is leading the development of vUSA? Who are the key players at DHS and what are their roles?

vUSA is an initiative of DHS, and is being executed by the Command, Control and Interoperability (CCI) Division of the Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate, with support from S&T's First Responder Technologies Program (R-Tech). Other components within DHS, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), are engaged in vUSA.

Why should my State be part of vUSA?

By implementing vUSA in your state, you will be able to make better, more informed decisions, respond faster, and coordinate the sharing of critical information among first responders from multiple jurisdictions and disciplines, as needed. Emergency management can improve when practitioners at all levels of government have access to the information they need, when they need it. Intrastate and interstate information sharing ultimately can improve our Nation's safety.

Is vUSA something I can plug into? If so, how?

CCI and R-Tech are working with several states and technology providers to develop an immediately accessible and secure solution for the vUSA system that can link information-sharing systems across the Nation by establishing vUSA connectivity. By relying on a series of technological, operational, and procedural standards, vUSA will enable a method and capability for users to share information, regardless of the platform, tool, or system that they are using.

Is vUSA focused primarily on geographic information systems (GIS)? Is vUSA a mapping application?

vUSA is focused on improving information acquisition, analysis, management, sharing, and protection by making all types of information and data – including GIS – actionable so that it can be used effectively. While there is a great deal of information out there, most of it resides in different places throughout the country. Because of this, much of the data is stove-piped in proprietary systems, limiting its usefulness and making it difficult to share and analyze. The vUSA initiative is designed to solve this problem.

Some states, such as Virginia and Alabama, have found GIS or map-based applications to be invaluable for sharing and visualizing information. However, GIS is just one way to visualize information. While DHS recognizes these success stories and encourages other states to learn from these examples, GIS or map-based applications are not the only mechanisms to improve information acquisition, analysis, management, sharing, and protection.

When did the vUSA Initiative start? What is the date for completion?

DHS began working on vUSA in late 2008; however, the initiative kicked off with the onset of its Southeast Regional Operations Pilot Project (SE ROPP) in February 2009. vUSA will be considered complete when emergency managers and responders across the Nation have access to the information they need when they need it, in the form they want it, as authorized.

Do I need a specific platform to be part of vUSA?

DHS does not mandate any specific solution, and vUSA uses a vendor-agnostic approach that does not require a specific information-sharing platform. vUSA enables information sharing through all existing technologies, platforms, and systems without requiring users to adopt a particular solution.

Who are the vUSA end users?

Who is vUSA for? Who is currently participating in vUSA?

vUSA was created as a voluntary information-sharing initiative designed to support emergency management, homeland security, and public safety officials at all levels of government. The goal of vUSA is to be inclusive of local, tribal, state, Federal, and private industry users, to better enable seamless access to the information that participants need to fulfill their missions.

The initiative currently involves a series of pilot projects, each of which is designed to tackle one or several unique issues particular to the pilot site. The pilot projects' resulting lessons learned and best practices will assist in the next phase of vUSA implementation, and will also be openly shared with other states and jurisdictions who are interested in adopting the vUSA model. Current participants include Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

Will vUSA have international participants?

vUSA has participated in international conferences and meetings, but it is not yet being implemented at the international level. However, DHS is considering international collaborations and maintains strong relationships outside the United States. While implementing vUSA has been discussed with Canada, there are no official international users yet.

What are the costs of vUSA?

Are there any costs associated with being part of vUSA?

Participants define their requirements and associated costs based upon their operational needs, an inventory of their existing equipment and systems, and the gaps that need to be filled. In many cases, by using the vUSA methodology and its collaborative environment, there are no additional direct costs associated with being a part of vUSA. Many participants use their existing systems and must maintain those systems and the staff that supports them; thus, there is no additional cost to acquire, analyze, manage, share, or protect information with vUSA.

Is there grant funding associated with being a part of vUSA? For states that already have information-sharing projects, from where have they obtained funding?

Currently there is no Federal grant funding specifically associated with vUSA. However, states may use grant funds available through Federal Government programs to contribute to costs associated with their information-sharing projects, especially when these projects facilitate information sharing across jurisdictions and disciplines. States that have already initiated information-sharing projects have used internal funding and grant funds to support the development of their projects.

How secure will my information be?

If I share information using the vUSA concept, is it automatically accessible to everyone, including the public? What if I want to decide who gets what information I own based on other participants' roles and responsibilities; for example allowing access to only certain types of emergency responders?

vUSA does not specify operating procedures for local and state systems; however, vUSA recommends that these systems provide user-based access to their information. This means that the system owner determines who has access to what information. Whether the system owner wants to provide the public with access to specific information, or allow only a few users to have access to that information, vUSA encourages all system owners to build their information-sharing systems with user-based access.

Who maintains the security of vUSA? What are you doing to protect data and privacy?

All information is locally owned and security will be maintained by the individual systems, as this enables system owners to protect their information based on their own security needs. In addition, CCI has multiple identity management projects in development that enhance security by improving authentication of users, protect privacy with anonymization projects, and protect the federated digital infrastructure that is needed to meet current and future system requirements. Once finalized, these research and development projects will help to inform future vUSA developments.

Is information stored in a central location?

One of the core vUSA principles is that all information remains locally owned and maintained, which means there is no central data repository. Because users view a *read-only* copy of the information, the integrity and accuracy of data is maintained by the owner.

How does vUSA fit into the White House Open Government Directive?

What is the White House Open Government Initiative?

President Obama's first executive action focused on increasing government transparency and reshaping the government according to the three core values of transparency, participation, and collaboration. In addition to making its efforts more accessible to the public, the White House is also celebrating innovators who are championing the President's vision of a more effective and open government. Any agency effort that uses transparency, participation, and collaboration to achieve their mission are recognized in the Open Government Innovations Gallery. vUSA is one such initiative.

Why did the White House incorporate vUSA into its Open Government Directive rollout?

In early November 2009, White House representatives attended the Southeast Regional Operations Platform Pilot (SE ROPP) cornerstone demonstration, which marked the first significant step in the development of vUSA. Following the demonstration, the White House suggested that vUSA be highlighted as an exemplary initiative exhibiting Open Government's three core values of transparency, participation, and collaboration. vUSA was one of only three Federal initiatives among the 20 current open government initiatives that were highlighted by the White House in its rollout.

How does vUSA relate to other agencies information-sharing programs and platforms?

How is vUSA different from other Federal information-sharing programs? How is Virtual USA platform different from the WebEOC/ESRI/Google system I already use?

There are many technologies and programs that have been developed to address specific user-centric needs and requirements. vUSA is different from other programs and systems in that it enables information sharing across all platforms and technologies without requiring users to adopt a particular solution. vUSA will incorporate any of the other specific technologies if required.

Is vUSA part of the National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP)?

vUSA is aligned with NECP principles and was recently endorsed by the SAFECOM Executive Committee (EC) and Emergency Response Committee (ERC). These organizations comprise

local and state practitioner associations and subject matter experts, and they work closely with DHS on issues of communications interoperability.

How are you ensuring inclusion at the Federal level?

From its inception, vUSA has sought to work with relevant agencies within DHS and throughout the government, including the Department of Defense, the National Guard and others. Since Secretary Napolitano publically launched vUSA in December 2009 and the White House released its Open Government Directive, vUSA systematically has been reaching out to relevant agencies to improve coordination at all levels.

Who can I contact for more vUSA information?

How can I get involved in vUSA?

vUSA has recently moved from an initial proof-of-concept phase and into a second phase consisting of advancing pilots in states to promote regional collaboration. As vUSA moves into subsequent phases, CCI will be working to allow more states and localities to actively participate in pilots and case studies. The advanced pilots will build upon technical and operational lessons learned from the initial phase to address capability gaps that would prohibit seamless information sharing. Advanced pilots will:

- Develop and implement an advanced prototype for information sharing
- Institutionalize Virtual USA among participating jurisdictions
- Operationalize Virtual USA among participating jurisdictions

In the next year, CCI hopes to continue to provide technical assistance through its pilots, including the nationwide dissemination of guidance documents and best practice methodologies, to the states and localities to improve statewide and regional information sharing. The first vUSA guidance document, *Approaches to Statewide Collaboration and Information Sharing*, will be available in the first quarter of 2010. Additionally, if you are participating in a statewide information-sharing initiative and would like to share your best practices and lessons learned, please e-mail virtualusa@dhs.gov. These best practices and lessons learned will help inform future guidance documents.

CCI is also working with several states and technology providers to develop a vUSA prototype technical capability to better integrate disparate information-management applications to enable more effective multi-jurisdictional, multi-disciplinary incident management operations. CCI hopes to test the prototype technical capability in the next year with several of its pilot states. Once testing and evaluation of the prototype is complete, CCI's goal is to make it available to all 56 states and territories.

If you would like to receive information and updates related to vUSA, please e-mail virtualusa@dhs.gov to subscribe to our quarterly newsletter *Interoperability Today*.